

A KIND OF DISCREET PROTESTANTISM... BIBLICAL METAPHORS AND CONTEMPORARY PARADIGMS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH BERLIN-BRANDENBURG-SILESIAN UPPER LAUSITZ (EKBO)

What a privilege and joy to contribute some thoughts to this conference offering one personal perspective. I'd like to offer some experiences working for the Church of Berlin, Brandenburg and Silesian Upper Lausitz. There I have the honour to be part of the department of „Theology and Church Life“. Since I became part of this department I am exploring what that means. I am telling you this because I represent the organisational and institutional perspective on our topic, and I want to keep the *life* aspect in mind and see, which patterns are visible in the relation of stability of organisation and movement of the organised, or: to what extent is there *life* within this institution. I'm not looking for medical proof here that there is still a heartbeat and the patient church is still alive, I am looking at ways in which my institution is doing its job as serving organisation to support, promote and demand the Protestant life in the parishes and communities of the city, the district, the country.

„Tent – temple – public square... If Protestantism is to find new relevance in our European context, then we have to re-imagine and reform our understandings and practices as Protestants.“ This statement touches what I consider the core of my homework for today and my work every day.

In the Regional Church where I serve, the geography creates two opposing sets of demands, those of the metropolis Berlin and those of the rural provinces of Brandenburg and the Saxonian districts. This mix of the thick urban air and the fresh countryside breeze creates the special atmosphere of my regional church. The European dimension and the provincial dimension meet here.

I will try to find a corridor between two positions. And I allow myself to describe these two positions with the help of two quotes: (1) „...imagination is more important than knowledge.“ Albert Einstein's wide known saying fits my situation: My knowledge of where I come from today is the knowledge of a beginner in the context of Protestant church as organisation. I am still in the beginnings of getting to know the *Landeskirche* as an organisation. So maybe here and there you'll find more imagination than knowledge. On the other hand we all have an idea of what can happen if imagination stands all alone unaccompanied by knowledge or skills. That's why I'd like to share a second quote with you (2): „Imagination without skills gives us modern art“(an insight from Tom Stoppard). So I hope not be a modern artist in Stoppard's sense but a theologian with imagination and some experience here and there. What about *re*-imagination? It means: to consider in new ways, allow your visions new

colours. To reconsider means to define the space for God's promise and our mandate grounded and nurtured in His promise.

Re-imagination sounds quite popular: in education it is one of the promising programs. It is supposed to be intertwined with innovation and revolution. We have an idea of the power of re-imagination in the process of getting well again after sickness. Others promote reimagination as necessary for your way of working either towards a new and better balance of life and work or towards a new power of high quality and total commitment in the company. However re-imagination seems to be a promise in itself.

But as Protestants in Europe shouldn't we better cut down our visions? The Protestant future will most probably not be the future of a majority. Rather, coming from East German regions I get clearly the impression of the invisible church, more than a visible church. Having this in mind let me draw some lines regarding our present and future times.

1) In our time and place: Contemporary ecumenical Protestantism as a good sister of a diverse civil religious society, and secularization in Europe

Problems within our regional church, questions of how to position questions of church law, which still carry the potential for conflicts today will certainly be obsolete within the next ten years, I'm sure. Let me give you an impression of our last synod, synod of a small church. One major topic was: „Reformation - our church and the one World“. Further topics: (1) work for and with refugees (2) rebuilding of a church destroyed in the sixties in Potsdam (3) wedding ceremony for gay couples (*Partnerschaftsgleichstellungsgesetz*).

What about the *European* perspective? This *is* the European perspective.

1) Work for and with refugees: European political decisions lead us to new situations from one month to the other. For example: still in February we develop housing strategies and search for staff, two months later we realize the enormous cut down of arriving people and have to reconsider what to do. What will be at the end of this year? We don't know. Our refugee work as a church is only a small drop in the context of the whole societal engagement. But the renewal of relationships, the renewal of respect we receive from the secular institutions in working together with us is incredible. For a long time we are seen as much more needed then decades before.

2) Rebuilding a church tower linked with a great concept of education and reconciliation work: The *Garrisonkirche* in Potsdam, a sign of historical beauty, but also of historical guilt and helplessness at the same time was finally destroyed in the sixties by the GDR government. A network of people and foundations and a centre of reconciliation and historical training right there; how to balance reconstruction and the new concept of work?

People are divided by that question. Within church a lot of discussion took place. The synod of the EKBO (105 members) finally decided to provide help. Do we need this tower? Is it a question of need or luxury in these times? Looking at the wounds, guilt and shames of Germany and Europe is this still our work for today's Europe? Or is it just another church tower to have a great view from into the city of Potsdam?

3) The decision of the synod to offer the same worship for gay/ lesbian people in civil partnership as for heterosexual marriages ... Compared to some European countries nothing new at all. And there is also a practice of blessing same sex unions in our church for years already. But now we wanted to adjust the law and what we did was a huge consultation beforehand within some months. The result is in short: We are aware of a conservative, biblical and stable pious number of Christians whom we meet everywhere in our church (not just in the rural contexts!) and we respect the differing positions.

On the one hand there is this open public Protestantism fighting for our common ground in Europe and on the other hand there are powers, positions saying: let's concentrate inwards, let's see that we will not become too diverse and too pluralistic. We lose ourselves politically and spiritually. What's surprising to me: both sides use in some ways the rhetoric of the confessions and even Barmen to ground their positions.

Protestant churches are in manifold ways part of the great Protestant family. Their diversity is a typical Protestant invention anchoring in the insight: unity follows from a stable diversity.

Nobody seriously seems to anticipate a modern Europe rechristianized in terms of a Corpus Christianum. Really nobody? Coming from my particular background I maintain: the Protestant churches affirm the plurality of religions and conceive themselves as learning space of diversity in all regards. Especially the minority churches teach us well at this point. I will not have to refer to the task of a *theology of diaspora*: An enormous challenge for the Protestant churches in diverse religious contexts!

In my church I perceive an altogether affirmative awareness of the ongoing process of secularization. Protestant tradition has never been characterized by a dichotomic attitude which sees the world as an antagonistic place divided from the holy. The ramifications of 40 years of continued anti-religious education and social impregnation in East Germany are part of the world we have learned to accept. But we can also now see that the different kinds of atheism which we are confronted with, especially in Germany's East, do not have the power to create binding values or create any form of commitment. All I can see is a powerless atheism brought forth by habit.

And at the same time we know: nothing else will compensate the so called *Volkskirche* – as we used to know the phenomenon. No other or new form of religion, no other world religion, and no hidden religiosity will fully compensate. The transformation of our ways of living our beliefs will take other paths than the ones we know so far.

What we notice is the anti-institutional attitude among people who generally rather look for the self-empowerment of their religious subjectivity in a safe distance to any kind of institutionalized system.

For Christians standing in a quite biblical-evangelical wing it seems odd today to imagine the *Landeskirche* as a committed community keeping the institution strong by staying inside. The more prominent thought is quite often: The smaller certain Christian groups are the stronger Protestantism will be as a movement. But there is no evidence for this at all.

So, what about the predictions regarding the Regional Churches, the *Landeskirchen*?

On the one hand, if any the Regional Churches (*Landeskirche*) stand for a certain impact in society. They represent a system of interactions which can comprehensively interact with other social systems. On the other hand: Currently, the respect for the Regional Churches as serious partners in dialogue is rather diminishing in the communities. Are they too vague and too timid in their ecclesiology? Is their constant strain of interior criticism the problem: too pluralistic and indecisive, but also too dogmatic and ossified, not engaged enough in social affairs, but also not engaged enough in biblical and fine scriptural work? Do the Regional Churches really suffer under a list of too much and not enough at the same time? Still, in the general public, no other voice of the Protestant churches is so distinguishable than the voice of the *Landeskirchen*. Actually, there is no time for a lack of self-esteem, courage and orientation.

Some among us describe the situation in Europe as an *asymmetric religious pluralism*. So what does the engagement and activity of many smaller Protestant Free Church groups mean for the Protestant main churches, the *Landeskirchen*? What is truly challenging is the decrease of the number of people actively involved in the *Landeskirche*. They were highly committed throughout years. If they leave, and there is a tendency towards this development, this loss endangers many future fields of work in the *Landeskirche*. This is a kind of secular dynamics we are facing right now. Consequences not to be known yet.

If the *Landeskirchen* lose their impact, Jan Hermelink maintains, the whole of Protestantism will lose impact in society, including the evangelical wing, the Free Churches and the independent parishes. If new parish founders and providers of religious ideas thrive at the expense of the resources of the *Landeskirchen*, especially the resource of volunteer work,

they will destroy their own resources in the long term. Things would be different if they managed to open up large numbers of non-believers for religious matters. But there are no sign for this happening, in total quite the contrary seems to be the case.¹

What do the representatives and professionals conclude and suggest? The common ground and the common mandate have to be more important than internal differences in teaching and practice. What we need is a shared joy looking at a community of diverse voices. But it is impossible to demand joy and commitment. It is no solution to impress people with dark visions of the future. Love towards your own church and commitment would be the result of an inner process of spiritual regrowth. Regrowth in a sense of inner *metanoia*. Papers and committees are of only limited use at this point. On the other hand: I see strong inspirational powers coming from honest theological work within the Council of Christian Churches in Germany. It stands for far more than a chamber of commerce of the churches. It stands for more than just joint interests. We have great work to do. The central question is: Does the partnership and fellowship with the manifold Protestant brothers, sisters, cousins and neighbours promote or heal inner separatism within the main Protestant church? Could it strengthen our ability to deal with plurality? Will it strengthen our sense of a common mandate that incorporates all distinctions and differences?

Another point of view: We are facing a shift of paradigms in European society. Within the last decades we again and again affirmed the end of national homogeneity. Now we see among all the new nationalisms the strong tendency of anti-European siege mentality - also within some parishes. European developments touch parish life. We notice arising right wing attitudes maybe due to a strong conservative anti-liberal position, maybe due to pure social fears and *xenophobia*. The signs and evidences come up here and there, nothing to be measured in numbers yet, signals only. But: an evidence to be aware of especially in the regions of the former GDR.

How did we come so far? Coming from the East of Germany and after having experienced the golden and liberal 90ties and what had come afterwards I personally ask myself: where do we go from here as one of many different Protestant voices as one of several churches as church in a minority? There has been a deep and exhausting discourse about the statements of reform and reformation for the years to come. We promised each other honest clarifications about what we will concentrate on. Commitments about future challenges and necessary points of focus within the manifold powers of a civil society have been approved several times. Homework seems to be done at this point. What's next?

¹ My thoughts and questions follow closely Jan Hermelink, *Kirchliche Organisation und das Jenseits des Glaubens. Eine praktisch-theologische Theorie der evangelischen Kirche*, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2011.

Let me now go on with some systematic considerations with a glimpse at today's challenge.

2) Systematic-theological insights - some Eucharist and incarnational perspectives

How are we going to speak of a renewal of Protestantism? And I speak of the capacity of Protestantism to be diverse, to be able to cooperate with all partners and members of the family? What will be the shaping process for this way of cooperation, fellowship and inner Protestant interconfessional family-life?

I allow myself a short parenthesis at this point. One of the African guests on the synod of the EKBO last weekend recommended not to get stuck in a „theology of giraffes“. He meant: European theology of reformation is in danger of becoming a giraffe-theology in the sense that while doing theology we cannot exclusively live off the delicate green leaves at the top of the trees. Yes, I see this temptation in doing European theology. And nevertheless I see the necessity of a giraffe-theology on another level: Giraffes carry one of the biggest and strongest hearts in their bodies. A long neck needs that strong heart. From here it makes sense to speak not only of the theology of a giraffe but also of the language of the giraffe (speaking of Rosenberg's category of communication without violence). So I hope we go for more giraffes in Europe starting with the location of the reformers here in Wittenberg, implies to start with an understanding of Church constantly urged of renewal and reformation. Church takes place and lives where people gather around God's word: „The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered.“ (*Confession of Faith of Augsburg VII*).

Protestantism stands for permanently refreshing and updating this common ground, even within the institutional work. Church as an institution has as such its legitimation, if any, only by the fact that church within God's world is established, instituted by his word to be listened to. From here all rules and structures of the church enabling the live of the „saints „are derived. Church so we learn from the reformers, from the reformer Martin Luther, is to be seen as *ecclesia audiens*. The act of listening and receiving and even the act of teaching (*ecclesia docens*) are acts of passiveness in the last. Acts lacking power compared to what the world sees and measures as power. Coming from the perspective of sacraments, from the Eucharist thinking, to be concrete - Protestantism stands for renewal throughout celebration and commemoration within the *congregatio sanctorum*. And here we connect with a deep anticipative attitude: We anticipate the future, God's future by commemorating the past. We celebrate knowing that the promise of becoming new is not in our hands. We celebrate that the future of the Protestant family is not dependent from our capacities and successes. Church is what is granted to us as *creatura verbi*. As such the Protestant church

is in itself good news to us, a congregation practising consolation, encouragement and so fulfilling its divine mandate.

Church life as consolation, encouragement and mandate happens to be within diverse frames. Metaphors of tent, temple und public square are such framings for this huge body needing a powerful giraffe-heart within! We approach them best in a dialectical sense. And we touch probably not the first time in this workshop the Biblical critique of building the temple. To construct a temple implies to be free enough to leave the temple when the time and the call have come. The Biblical critique of building a temple does teach us: It is legitimate to build temples, churches, made of stone, structure and human stability, and as long as we keep ourselves reminded: God is not a God of final settlement in this world as strong as his commitment and liability to this world is. God is not to be hold by structures and stones. God's concept reaches wider and deeper: the incarnate God dwells among us. I don't want to outline the theology of incarnation connected to God's presence from tent to public. Who wants to persuade us that God prefers four walls and a roof to wide-open spaces? Church bodies and buildings are not the safest and most reliable places to encounter the living God. We need anew a spiritual deep longing for a theology of incarnation and ask from here the major questions about the church to come.

We are called to have a look from the incarnate God towards the human efforts: Speaking of *missio Dei* – and I do not have to repeat here the ways of understanding *missio Dei* - we only can reaffirm ourselves that God's presence will never be a product of our efforts. The temptation is great to go for such efforts and successes in certain drifts within the Regional churches as well as in all confessional communities and groups. This is the temptation forgetting about God's incarnated promise yet still to be fulfilled. It is a dangerous temptation no matter how energetic the fresh movement comes along. By the way, there can be a lot of stagnation and standstill under the surface of such movements under tents more stir and inflexible thinking than in any church made of bricks and windows. And church can be crushed by its ancientness and rigidity. The public square can contradict every Christian word of freedom losing itself in the slipstreams of competition.

That's why needless to maintain tent and temple are no simple alternatives, neither are temple and public market.

My perspective is, all three are needed as supplementing methods and answers to local needs in European neighbourhood. And there is a fourth one: a fourth biblical perspective is needed. Let me call it the shelter place – Martin Luther translated the *Herberge* (though

referring to different Greek words)². I'll explain later. Let's assume for now that within these four perspectives life can grow towards an authentic movement of Protestantism.

In more detail: We need the tents for everything stuck in those everlasting and exhausting lines of discussions in bodies and committees. Refreshing tents have several shapes here: for instance project oriented work for a limited time with an honest evaluation supported by easy access to financial help (*Fonds missionarischer Aufbruch*³). Our tents can also be the mega-events coming up in 2017 giving space for celebrating new ideas as well. But it makes sense to put the tents together – let me say this with another metaphor - on „camping sites „today. Wild or free camping is romantic and close to nature but will do damage to the environment. I do not want to speak for control of tents where they stand and so on. I want to make a case for stable neighbourhood at the camping-site – much better than being alone in the wilderness.

We need the paradigm of temple for the restless workers and walkers in a globalizing world; a world demanding a high price for speed, effort, success. As a church of reformation we have been tempted so many times to follow these false promises of deadly restlessness. What if the main message of Protestantism receives its main brightness from the word of grace readjusting the disgrace of a world running wild in its global goals? What if Protestantism builds the temple idea of preservation, consolation and shelter for the hunted middle and under class? What if we allow the refreshment of small temples, smaller communities here and there as an act of rebuilding confidence into God and one another?

The public square – of course, the Areopag more than ever it seems to be the yardstick or benchmark for our Protestant engagement. Whatever the categories express, I am convinced that *public or cultural Christianity* as much as *churchal Christianity* get one in receiving God's Word and are both one at the table of community as nurturing background for being dismissed in the world. What is Christianity without gathering under God's word in whatever light it comes to us? The Aeropag is not necessarily a category of its own although we all know of the importance of the media awareness and the manifold endless cultural interactions. But the category of the public only has its legitimation from its opposite pole, as I would name it, from: the *Herberge*. Luther makes use of this term in his Bible translation. In the neighbourhood of such a shelter God is born: God without such shelter in the world. God gives that space free for the people looking for such shelter. Only once the one who has no shelter makes use of a shelter: in celebrating the final supper with the disciples (Luke 22:11). In Herbergen the sick and the wounded get help and will be enabled to life their lives (look at

² Luke 2, John 1:38; Luke 10; Luke 22:1; Act 28:23.

³ In work since 2002 with circa 210 projects.

the Good Samaritan).⁴ Finally looking at Acts 28:23 *Herbergen* are places of listening. Here is where Paul preaches: in a shelter. Publicity for the word of God in a somewhat sheltered way for a limited amount of time. It is a category not just of its own but always in relation to the higher amount of stability of a temple and the fresh air of the Areopag.

But once again: the incarnated God in a shelter's neighbourhood (*Herberge*) – teaching us this: God dwelling in the world provides at the same time space for shelter and for listening, for spiritual and other concerns to be solved. In the contexts of churches we find such places everywhere spiritual space of peace and prayer, also contemplative orders. Speaking of the shelter on the one hand and the open public space at the other hand we follow the dynamics of a God being there for us in hidden ways as much as in open sense. It follows one mainline of Protestant interpretation of God – the dialectics of concealment within revelation and disclosure within the secret. Linked with this sort of interpretation of God there is only one small step to Protestant self-understanding. It is mainly a self-understanding as a *discreet Christianity*⁵, especially among postmodern conditions.

3) Claims on Protestant church as institution, organisation and movement

To sum up: Protestantism finds itself being grounded in the congregation of the saints receiving the gospel and commemorate it's sacramental dimension. Protestantism stands in direct relations to God's incarnational presence in the world and in direct relations to God's presence in the dynamics of the revelation of the secret, the hidden.

From here it would be an easy matter to relate the tent to self-organisational issues, the temple to relate to the stable institution and the public square to the powers of movement! A too easy matter! Temple and divine foundation cannot be seen at the same level. *Institutum est* – refers to what is given and set up by God (*göttliche Stiftung*). This is not quite what we have in mind with the inner biblical critique of constructing a temple. We have to take into account: Already for a longer while it's clear to follow a renewed understanding of „institution „compared to daily knowledge. *Institutum* is not what is given by traditional or religious entities. Quite frankly we have to say: instead of institutions norms and standards like autonomy, reflexivity and responsible life decisions are given. All those are elements grounded in faith expressed and represented within the framework of priesthood of all believers. With the deep theological insights and outlines of Jan Hermelink we can keep in mind, that church is to be seen as divine foundation, as *institutum*, *where and whenever* the practising *saints* receive the critical impulse of the gospel critically directed towards law,

⁴ Compare with Jeremia 9:1.

⁵ Compare with Kristian Fechtner, *Diskretes Christentum: Religion und Scham*, Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2015. I am very grateful to Fechtner's category of discreet Christianity and borrow it applying a somewhat other perspective.

social circumstances and also towards the organisation of the church. So not the temple but the critique of the temple refers to what we call *institutum*.

Let's keep some conclusions. The Protestant church will stay true to itself in maintaining its tent-like liquidity in all directions. Protestantism is not about setting up the borders or conditions for the *institutum*. Protestantism and the *Landeskirchen*, stands for welcoming the border traffic with all kinds of neighbours, strangers and friends. A vivid border traffic into the neighbourhood with a tendency of *kenosis* and permanently re-considering the own humble places for tents and shelters. I'm not implying church has to have the aim to vanish. But coming from the category of the *institutum* there is a way provided to refresh the organisational church by dynamic border traffic freed from fear of losing power, structures or influence. In daily religious life we can experience the consequences. Open access without any reserve towards resources, buildings, worships and other interactions and enactments. Open access for anyone. A truly accessible, inclusive church willing to liquidate if time or necessity has come. This is where movements move a whole lot. Jan Hermelink is clear at this stage of reflection: The organisational tent-like and fluid appearance of church receives its critical counterpart from the God's *institutum*. The tent-like and public interaction among the saints as much as the enactment of faith and witnesses of faith anchors in the *institutum* – the *institutum* as a critique of human efforts without mercy or self-justification and attempts to keep the *status-quo*.⁶ The critical counterpart has to keep church from self-aggrandisement facing God's coming into the world.

This leads us to the worshipping community in whatever setting of interaction. Church is an organisation we need in order to enact public Protestant faith.⁷

To coordinate, to frame and to decide ... Such kind of organisation we know from church. And we actually know about all organisations they are considered as permanently in need of reform. Organisations live in this permanent balance of critique and reform. And our organisation is nothing without *congregatio* and the *institutum est*. We heard of the juxtaposition: pioneering system on the one hand with listening and facilitating; and the organisation, the structured system at the other side, controlling and prescribing. And one of the participants maintained: We have to have the best theologians in the pioneering work. But what about we develop the organisation from controlling and prescribing towards listening and facilitating?

⁶ I follow Jan Hermelink's rich insights in: *Kirchliche Organisation und das Jenseits des Glaubens*.

⁷ Jan Hermelink, aaO, 89ff.

How inspiring and exiting a rethinking of organisations can be I learned with Frederic Laloux and his breathtakingly successful publication about how to reinvent organisations.⁸ Right after its release it immediately had a strong echo. How to reform organisations?

The key breakthroughs are relationships; they are the first and the last thing to put energy in. Furthermore Frederic Laloux refers to self-management, wholeness, evolutionary purpose as steps of reinventing organisations.

Self-management replaces hierarchies. Distributed leadership, with inner rightness and purpose as primary motivator and yardstick is necessary. Needless to say time is ripe for this change of culture within the bodies of Protestant church.

Organization is seen as a living entity, with its own creative potential and evolutionary purpose. One of the fine and extremely hopeful examples Frederic Laloux uses for illustration is a *Protestant* school, founded a decade ago by parents. The school is located in Berlin.

This school truly is a soulful way to run an organisation an example about absolutely new ways of getting schools organized. I was lucky to be a partner minister there for years. The principle is as follows: We recognize that we are all deeply interconnected, part of a bigger whole that includes nature and all forms of life. Any problem is an invitation to learn and grow. We will always be learners. We have never arrived. Typically Protestant? Yes, and Laloux went to school in Protestantism to develop his reinvention of organisations.

The main focus is: Everything will unfold with more grace if we stop trying to control and instead choose to simply sense and respond.

So this will be one of the challenges to make use of the idea of reinvented organisations relating to the organisation of Protestant churches. And we will realize we have already started reinventing – 500 years ago.

⁸ Frederic Laloux, *Reinventing Organizations: A Guide to Creating Organizations Inspired by the Next Stage in Human Consciousness*. In German: Vahlen Verlag April 2015.

4) Instead of a Conclusion: Protestantism in Europe

What do Protestants owe Europe? What do we call our mandate thinking of Europe? Let me mention some aspects: reconcile, serve and take serious the work of a *public deacon* in the world.

Renewal of organisation and clarification about our *institutum* leads us to what I would call a *Eucharist Eurocommunio* to celebrate in tents, temples, public squares and in the shelters for people in need including us.

Maybe Protestantism is a little *salty* for Europe – no more no less. We are no watchmen and watch-women although we watch here and there, but we strengthen the personal powers of responsibility and education within an ecumenical Protestantism in good neighbourhood with other religions and serving civil powers. This is what I refer to speaking of *discreet Protestantism*. Protestantism is actually nothing to be categorized by strength or weakness itself. The true category for Protestantism is if necessary its partnership of believe and doubt. As long as we live this in the dialectics of power and powerlessness among tents, temples and public we are seen and heard and give God a chance in this world to find space for altars and shelters. We can re-arrange the tents; move them from right to left on the camping sites. But above all we do this only because we long for God's future in tents, temples in the public, in the hidden shelters.